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ABSTRACT

Of approximately 1400 participants in a job program for older workers, 200 were randomly sampled to investigate the following: (1) Does work have substantial meanings other than economic for this population? (2) What are these meanings and their relative importance in keeping the worker in the labor force? (3) Is there a relationship between the workers' characteristics and the meaning work holds for them? The workers were employed through a grant given to the New York City Department for the Aging in 1975 to employ persons aged 55 or over. A high percentage of the respondents found work to have meanings that were not economic. The most frequently mentioned reasons for continuing to work were the desire to remain active and engaged, money, desire for meaningful life experience, and socialization. The major demographic variables were unrelated to these meanings of work. Persons who sought meaningful life experiences from work tended to be of higher social class, consider their health good, and live with a spouse. Persons who gave money as a reason for working were more likely to view their incomes as inadequate although they were more likely to be of higher social class background. Activity as a meaning of work was equally important to all subgroups of workers, having no relationships with any of the worker characteristics. These findings suggest that despite indications of a decline in the work ethic there is a population of older persons who highly value the engagement of time and energy demanded by work. (Author/MFD)

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THE MEANING OF WORK FOR RE-EMPLOYED OLDER WORKERS

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The problems faced by the older worker who becomes unemployed have been well documented. Compared to younger unemployed persons older jobseekers are less likely to obtain re-employment (Sheppard, 1976). They have poorer re-employment prospects even when their education and work experience are comparable to those of younger workers (Lipsky, 1970; Wachtel, 1966). This situation is due, at least in part, to the older worker's less efficient job seeking strategies (Sheppard & Belitsky, 1966), agism on the part of employers (Wirtz, 1965) and less effective placement services (Connel, 1977). The problem is compounded by the worker's gradual sense of discouragement which often leads to his complete withdrawal from the labor force (Rosenblum, 1975).

Recent economic conditions have further aggravated employment problems of older persons. As a result, public job programs for this group have been developed and expanded under the Older Americans Act, the Public Works and Economic Development Act and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. Evidence that work has substantial meaning for participants other than income would lend support to the continuation of these programs. However, should work have no extra economic significance then pure income transfer mechanisms (i.e. extended unemployment benefits for older workers or the restriction of penalties for early retirement) might be more effective forms of assistance.

If work does hold extra economic meaning it would be useful to determine specifically what they are. Because of their motivational implications, they identify the outcomes desired by the worker in return for his efforts. The enhancement of the worker's job performance

and job satisfaction is in large measure related to the fulfillment of these desired outcomes (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976; Locke, 1976). Based on a knowledge of the meanings of work of potential participants, job programs for older workers can be designed to maximize the benefits to both the worker and employer.

This paper will therefore study participants in a job program for older workers in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1) Does work have substantial extra economic meanings for this population?
2) If it does, what are these meanings and their relative importance in keeping the worker in the labor force?
3) Is there a relationship between workers' characteristics and the meanings work holds for them?

Subjects, Methods and Procedure

In December of 1975, the New York City Department for the Aging received a grant under Title X of the Job Opportunities Program of the Public Works and Economic Development Act. As a result, approximately 1400 positions in municipal and voluntary agencies were created for unemployed persons aged 55 or over. Following an announcement in the press, job interviews were held with over 5,000 applicants in the City's five boroughs. Many of the workers were placed as community outreach workers often providing service to other older persons. Other positions included bookkeepers, museum aides, library aides, typists, cooks and kitchen aides. It should be noted that over 80% of the positions were only part-time and the median annual salary was approximately $2800.00.

Data for this paper are based on interviews with a random sample of 200 workers held during the program's first year. Interviewers identified themselves as researchers from the Department for the Aging and made clear their independence of the worker's employing agency. Assurance of complete confidentiality was given to the worker prior to the interview.

The age distribution of the study sample ranged from 55 to 86 with a median of 65. Whites, males, married persons and those between ages 55 and 60 were somewhat underrepresented in the sample compared to New York City's total population 55 and over (Table 1). It is possible that these persons are less likely to become unemployed, or if unemployed, are less inclined to accept low-paying part-time jobs. The sample was better educated and had fewer foreign-born persons than the City's 55 and over population. Median household income was $6780.00, inclusive of Title X salary.

Compared with a group of inner city residents aged 60 or over previously studied by the New York City Department for the Aging (Cantor, 1976; Cantor & Mayer, 1976) the sample of older workers saw themselves as having more adequate incomes and better health. While 43.2% of workers said they have enough income "to get along and even a little extra" only 27.0% of inner city residents felt their income was as adequate. Health status was perceived as good by 75.5% of the workers compared to only 33.9% of the inner city population.

Results

To find out whether work had extra-economic meaning for the workers, they were asked to respond to the following question:

"Suppose you had enough money to live as comfortably as you like, would you want to continue working?" Affirmative responses were given by 81.4% of Title X workers. It should be noted that the same question was asked of a large national sample of employed workers of all ages in which 65.8% said they would continue working (Quinn & Shepard, 1974). Therefore for these respondents work may be said to have a high level of extra-economic considerations, possibly even higher than that of the work force in general.

The second research question calls for the identification of the specific meanings work has for this population and the relative importance of each in terms of keeping the worker in the labor force. Workers were asked whether they would look for work if the program were to end. The workers who responded positively to this question or the question regarding continuing to work, even with enough money to live comfortably were then asked for their reasons for doing so. These responses were then coded into the five major meanings of work identified by Friedmann and Havighurst (1954): 1) money; 2) activity or the expenditure of time and energy; 3) meaningful life experience; 4) social interaction; and 5) respect and status from both self and others (see Appendex 1 for specific examples of responses and their coding). Similar meanings of work have been identified by Morse and Weiss (1955) and by Powers and Goudy (1971). Multiple responses were permitted.

The most frequently mentioned reason for continuing to work given by 56.5% of the workers, was the desire to remain active and engaged. Money was the second most important reason, given by half (49.5%) of the respondents. Desire for meaningful life experience was third, mentioned by only a quarter (26.0%) of the sample. About one-tenth mentioned the

desire for socialization (9.5%) while respect and status was mentioned by only 2.5%.

Further evidence of the relative importance of these meanings of work is available from Table 2. This table presents the results of a stepwise multiple regression in which the five meanings of work were used as independent variables in an attempt to predict desire to continue working if money were not a problem. When income is not an incentive to work the highest zero-order correlation was found with activity ($r=.28$, $p<.001$) followed by meaning ($r=.16$, $p<.01$). In the regression, activity accounted for more of the explained variance than all other work meanings.

A richer understanding of the four major work meanings is provided by the results of a principal factor analysis with oblique rotations performed on a 16-item instrument given to the workers pertaining to a variety of meanings of work (Table 3). The items tended to fall in factors resembling meaningful life experience, socialization, activity and money respectively. Respect was not found to produce an independent factor but rather was found to be part of the socialization factor. An interesting finding was the lack of a relationship between the two income items: "Earnings are essential to make ends meet" and "Earnings are a source of spending money for extras." The former item together with "Work increases independence from family" loaded on a separate factor while the second income item loaded highly on the socialization and status factor. This highlights the fact that working for money can serve basic survival and independence needs for some, while for others money can mean socialization opportunities and status.

The final research questions calls for a measure of the relationship,

if any, between worker characteristics and work meanings. As will be noted from Table 4, the major demographic variables were for the most part unrelated to the various work meanings. On the other hand, a more consistent pattern emerged with respect to the social class, health and marital status variables examined. Persons who sought meaningful life experience from work tend to be of higher social class, having had more education and more prestigious former occupations. More than any other group they were likely to live with a spouse. They also were more likely to consider their health as good. It would seem that older workers in the study sample who were concerned with achieving meaningful life experiences were more likely to be those whose basic survival and social needs were being met.

Persons who gave money as a reason for continuing to work were more likely to have lower incomes and to view their incomes as inadequate, although slightly more likely to be of higher social class background. No relationship between working for money and health or marital status was found.

An important finding with respect to activity as a meaning of work was its lack of relationship with any of the demographic, socio-economic, marital and health variables examined. This meaning of work was equally important to all sub-groups of the workers studied.

Summary and Conclusions

For participants in employment programs for older workers it was found that:

1) While income was undoubtedly important, these persons found work to have a high level of extra-

economic meanings.

2) Other than income, the most important meaning of work for these persons, in terms of their continuation in the labor force, was that it actively engaged their time and energy. A sizeable, though lesser proportion were concerned with finding meaningful life experiences through work. Relatively few workers considered socialization or respect as important reasons for continuing to work.

3) The various extra economic meanings of work were not related to the demographic variables of age, race or sex. The desire for activity is further unrelated to socio-economic status, health or living arrangements. Persons concerned with meaningful life experience through work are of higher socio-economic status, in better health and more likely to live with a spouse.

The findings suggest that despite indications of a decline in the work ethic (Shanas, 1972) there is a population of older persons for whom this is far from true. Whether based on a biological need for activity or because of ingrained cultural mores abhorring idleness, these persons highly value the engagement of time and energy demanded by work. Just providing these persons with equivalent income is therefore insufficient. Not only would mere income transfers deprive these workers of the values they achieve through work but would further deprive society of the contributions these people can make.

TABLE 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF TITLE X WORKERS AND GENERAL POPULATION 55+, NEW YORK CITY

	Title X 55+ (N=200)	New York City 55+ [1/]
55-59	17.5	25.2
60-64	26.0	23.2
65-69	29.5	19.3
70+	27.0	32.2
Male	37.0	43.0
Female	63.0	57.0
White	71.0	88.1
Black	23.0	10.7
Other	6.0	1.2
Married	51.3	57.4
Not Married	48.7	42.6
Native	73.5	62.7
Foreign Born	26.5	37.3
Less than eight	9.0	30.2
Eight	16.5	23.0
Less than twelve	20.0	15.8
Twelve	31.0	19.0
Thirteen +	23.5	11.9

[1/] Source: US Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population

TABLE 2

STEPWISE REGRESSION SUMMARY.

RELATIONSHIP OF WORK MEANINGS TO DESIRE TO CONTINUE WORK IF MONEY WERE NOT A PROBLEM*

	r	Beta	R	R^2	R^2 Change	F	Signif
Activity	0.28	0.33	0.28	0.08	0.08	16.51	.001
Meaning	0.16	0.23	0.36	0.13	0.05	10.18	.01
Money	-0.11	-0.09	0.37	0.14	0.01	1.67	NS
Socialization	0.01	0.04	0.37	0.14	0.00	0.37	NS
Respect	0.01	-0.02	0.37	0.14	0.00	0.13	NS

* Coded as follows: 1) Would quit immediatedly
2) Would quit but at a later age
3) Would never quit if possible

TABLE 3

FACTOR STRUCTURE MATRIX BASED ON PRINCIPAL FACTOR ANALYSIS OF 16 MEANING OF WORK ITEMS*, OBLIQUE ROTATION

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Work gives me a chance to get something done, make something of my life	0.65	0.55	0.39	0.54
Work gives me an opportunity to pass on what I have learned in life to others coming up	0.59	0.29	0.56	0.23
Work gives me an opportunity to use my skills and abilities	0.76	0.48	0.41	0.25
I get a great deal of enjoyment out of working	0.75	0.46	0.18	0.41
When I work I feel healthier and more alive	0.67	0.45	0.18	0.17
Work makes me feel valuable and useful	0.75	0.39	0.30	0.57
When I work I do not have time to worry about myself or my problems	0.40	0.52	0.34	0.25
I look forward to work because I am not alone	0.43	0.61	0.34	0.19
I feel much less lonely and cut off since I work	0.28	0.59	0.22	0.20
Work is a source of spending money for some of the extras	0.33	0.50	0.29	0.01
People respect me more when I have a job	0.30	0.64	0.29	0.29
Hobbies are all right but for me they do not take the place of work	0.27	0.47	0.30	0.36
The money I earn is essential to make ends meet	0.16	0.28	0.55	0.22
Work increases my independence from my children and family	0.36	0.55	0.72	0.17
Work gives my day a focus and structure	0.27	0.24	0.19	0.58
When I am working, I feel as if life is continuing to go forward	0.58	0.42	0.50	0.63

* Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree

TABLE 4

CORRELATES OF VARIOUS MEANINGS OF WORK

Worker Characteristics	Money	Activity	Social.	Meaning	Respect
Age	-.21**	.05	.02	-.12	-.12*
Race (0=whites, 1=non-whites)	-.08	.07	-.09	-.05	-.03
Sex (0=males, 1=females)	-.01	.00	.07	-.11	.12*
Marital Status (1=married, 0=not married)	-.07	.01	-.06	.26***	.03
Education	.06	-.03	-.10	.15*	.03
Occupational level	.07	.00	-.10	.14*	.01
Socio-economic Status, Hollingshead (1=lowest. . .5=highest)	.14*	-.10	-.05	.21**	.11
Income of Household	-.12*	.03	.03	.11	.09
Income Adequacy, Self-ratings	-.20**	-.02	-.03	.05	.06
Health, Self-ratings (1=poor, 2=fair, 3=good)	-.02	.06	.07	.13*	-.05

* P .05

** P .01

*** P .001

APPENDIX 1

CODING OF OPEN-ENDED MEANING OF WORK RESPONSES

Work Meaning	Sample Responses
1) Money	making a living; need the money; to help out the children (parents); don't need help from others; be independent; don't want charity
2) Active expenditure of time and energy	keep busy, active; mind occupied; gives a routine; something to do with time; gives day focus and structure; no time to worry; fills time
3) Social interaction	be with people; meet people; not alone; to be with friends
4) Meaningful life experience	feel useful, valuable, productive; feel alive; help people; gives meaning to life; gives life purpose and direction; get something done; make use of skills; moral
5) Respect and status	a) people respect me; people know who I am
	b) self-respect; you know who you are

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